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Voices of Federal Food Safety Scientists and Inspectors

Unsafe food can lead to illness and death, and disproportionately harms the most vulnerable members of society. While Americans are fortunate to enjoy a food supply among the safest in the world, there is significant room for improvement. Barely a month goes by without a recall of tainted food.

The August 2010 recall of shell eggs due to *Salmonella* contamination, as well as the 2006 outbreak of illness due to *Escherichia coli* in spinach, has brought the topic of food safety into the public spotlight. Roughly 76 million Americans still suffer from foodborne illnesses each year. While many of these illnesses are mild, they result in more than 300,000 hospitalizations and some 5,000 deaths annually (Mead et al. 1999). A recent study by a former Food and Drug Administration (FDA) economist puts the total price tag of foodborne illness related to produce in the United States at \$152 billion annually (Scharff 2010).

Because of globalization and the complexity of our food supply chain, foodborne disease outbreaks today are more widespread and difficult to isolate than in the past. Food policy experts agree that the market cannot regulate itself. Some food producers prioritize profits over public health, and consumers typically do not have the ability to identify contaminated food by sight or smell.

To evaluate how well the government uses science to protect the food supply, the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), working with researchers at Iowa State University, sent a 44-question survey to nearly 8,000 food safety employees at the FDA and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which together oversee our food system. More than 1,700 employees responded. The results reveal a food safety system where special interests and public officials all too often inhibit the ability of government scientists and inspectors to protect the food supply.

Reforms aimed at restoring scientific integrity are needed to combat the political and corporate interference at the FDA and USDA. The laws governing the system badly need to be updated to meet twenty-first-century challenges. Congress should give the FDA and USDA the authority to mandate food recalls, establish a science-based system for detecting harmful pathogens in the food supply, require food manufacturers to disclose more information to the government, and increase government surveillance of food imports. Congress also should provide adequate resources to more effectively police the food supply. Only then can the frequency and scale of disease outbreaks decline.



Union of Concerned Scientists
Citizens and Scientists for Environmental Solutions



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Special-Interest Pressure Remains Strong

Corporate interests, non-governmental organizations, and members of Congress have inappropriately influenced agency decision making in the past year.

- 330 respondents (27 percent) had personally experienced, either frequently or occasionally, “instances where the public health has been harmed by businesses withholding food safety information from agency investigators.” Meanwhile, 621 respondents (38 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that “public health has been harmed by agency practices that defer to business interests.”¹
- 301 respondents (25 percent) had personally experienced, either frequently or occasionally, “situations where corporate interests have forced the withdrawal or significant modification of [an agency] policy or action designed to protect consumers or public health.”
- 266 respondents (24 percent) had personally experienced, either frequently or occasionally, “situations where members of Congress have forced the withdrawal or significant modification of [an agency] policy or action designed to protect consumers or public health.”
- 243 respondents (22 percent) had personally experienced, either frequently or occasionally, “situations where non-governmental interests (such as advocacy groups) have forced the withdrawal or significant modification of [an agency] policy or action designed to protect consumers or public health.”

What Influences Agency Decisions

Encouragingly, a significant percentage of survey respondents said public health interests play a more important role in agency policy decisions than political or business interests.

- 509 respondents (31 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that the presence of top agency decision makers who have come from the food or agriculture industry “inappropriately influences the decisions made by the agency.”

- 1,221 respondents (75 percent) said their agencies give public health “a lot of weight” or “much weight” in policy decisions. Yet 953 respondents (58 percent) said that political interests had “a lot of weight” or “much weight” in policy decisions, and 729 respondents (44 percent) said that business interests had “a lot of weight” or “much weight” in policy decisions.
- 896 respondents (54 percent) said that the weight the agencies give to *political interests* in the decision-making process is “too high,” 384 respondents (23 percent) said it is “about right,” and 35 respondents (2 percent) said it was “too low.”
- 558 respondents (34 percent) thought the weight the agencies give to *business interests* in the decision-making process is “too high,” 675 respondents (41 percent) said it is “about right,” and 106 respondents (6 percent) said it was “too low.”

Political Interference in Science Continues

A significant number of respondents at both the FDA and USDA reported interference in their work over the past year.

- 507 respondents (34 percent) had personally experienced one or more incidents of political interference.
- 105 respondents (10 percent) had frequently or occasionally received requests from agency decision makers to “inappropriately exclude or alter technical information or conclusions in an agency scientific document.”
- 190 respondents (16 percent) had frequently or occasionally experienced “selective or incomplete use of data to justify a specific regulatory outcome.”
- 140 respondents (13 percent) had frequently or occasionally experienced “changes or edits during review that change the meaning of scientific findings that occur without a meaningful opportunity to correct them.”
- A majority of survey respondents with advanced degrees² (217 respondents, or 59 percent) disagreed or strongly disagreed that they are currently “allowed to speak to the public and the news media about my scientific research findings,

¹ Percentages are calculated in reference to the number of respondents who answered a given question, excluding those who responded “Does Not Apply”.



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regardless of the level of controversy on the topic.” Only 67 respondents (18 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that they were allowed to speak freely.

FDA Resources Are Inadequate

Only 39 percent of FDA respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the agency has “sufficient resources to effectively perform its mission,” with 47 percent disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. Conversely, 67 percent of USDA respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the same statement, with only 22 percent disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. These results likely reflect the fact that the USDA receives significantly more food safety funding than the FDA.

Some Foods Are Riskier than Others

Survey respondents had different degrees of confidence about the safety of various food products (see table below). Processed foods and meat and poultry received the highest marks; seafood, eggs, and fruits and vegetables were in the middle; and imported foods garnered the least confidence. As the FDA and USDA oversee different products, scientists and inspectors were only asked about products relevant to their respective agency.

	FDA/USDA		FDA ONLY			USDA ONLY
	Imported Foods	Fruits and Vegetables	Seafood	Eggs	Processed Foods	Meat and Poultry
Completely or Mostly Confident	35%	45%	49%	50%	62%	75%
Somewhat or Not at All Confident	52%	46%	43%	29%	30%	23%
Don't Know	13%	9%	8%	21%	8%	2%

Least Confident
➔
 Most Confident

Scientists and Inspectors in Their Own Words

“Our greatest weakness in food safety, by far, is imported food.” — a respondent from the FDA

“I have been here for 26 years and it still amazes me . . . how politics filter down to the lowest levels of government.” — a respondent from the FDA

“The sheer volume of food to be inspected falls on relatively few inspectors with little time and little technical backup to do the job.”

— a respondent from the USDA

“Typically once a member of Congress gets involved the agency does whatever it can to make the situation go away rather than address food safety issues.” — a respondent from the USDA

“Many producers only care about their ‘bottom line’ and true concern for public safety is secondary not in speech or written word, but in action.” — a respondent from the USDA

“No agency can be a substitute for an intelligent and vigilant consumer.” — a respondent from the USDA

“Food safety has succumbed to the higher priority of global corporate profits.” — a respondent from the FDA

2 Defined here as a master's degree, Ph.D., M.D., J.D., or D.V.M. Percentages do not include those who responded “Does Not Apply.”

Food Safety Survey Demographics

In March 2010, UCS sent a 44-question survey to 7,911 food safety employees at the FDA and USDA. The 1,710 employees who responded came from all levels of the food safety system. More than half of the respondents had worked at their respective agency for more than 10 years.

The Center for Survey Statistics and Methodology (CSSM) at Iowa State University consulted with UCS on the survey design, conducted the survey, and provided initial data tabulation and analysis.

About the Survey

This survey is the sixth in a series designed to assess the level of political interference in science at federal agencies. Past surveys have polled scientists at the Food and Drug Administration, Environmental Protection Agency, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Fisheries Division, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. UCS also has surveyed climate scientists at seven federal agencies and the National Center for Atmospheric Research. View complete survey results, more detailed survey methodology, and excerpts from respondents' essays at www.ucsusa.org/surveys.

Other Reports on Food Safety

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Scharff, R.L. 2010. *Health-related costs from foodborne illness in the United States*. Washington, DC: The Produce Safety Project at Georgetown University.

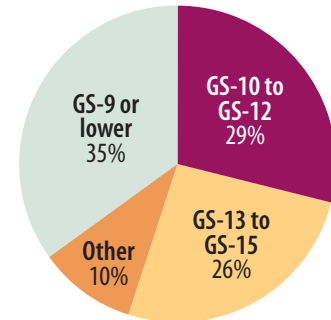
Trust for America's Health. 2009. *Keeping America's food safe: A blueprint for fixing the food safety system at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*. Washington, DC.

The UCS Scientific Integrity Program

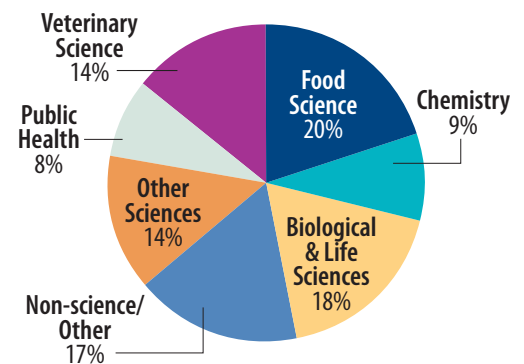
The UCS Scientific Integrity Program mobilizes scientists and citizens alike to defend science from political interference and restore scientific integrity in federal policy making. To learn more, visit www.ucsusa.org/scientific_integrity.

Charts display the number of survey respondents in each category.

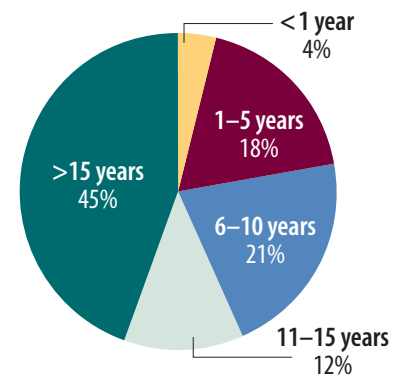
Current Grade Level



Major Fields of Training



Years at Agency



The Union of Concerned Scientists

The Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) is the leading science-based nonprofit working for a healthy environment and a safer world.

